



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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IBM wraps up computer field

Of all the trends and developments in the small computer industry, one foreshadows all the rest: IBM has taken over. Going all the way from non-participant in 1981 to father figure in 1984, IBM today utterly dominates the industry.

Besides shipping nearly triple the number of personal computers last year that it shipped in 1983, IBM made three key moves to dominate the business small computer market even further: It entered the software business, introducing dozens of programs carrying the IBM brand name and unveiled TopView, a new "operating environment" which has independent software developers scrambling to adapt their current programs. It lowered hardware prices, effectively wiping out the profit margins of the most PC-compatible machines. And it introduced PC compatibility with mainframe and minicomputers.

So, when I asked some fellow consultants and computer industry observers to help me pick the "hot" products on the market today — the ones they themselves would buy if they were shopping — it wasn't surprising that IBM dominated. There was a wide diversity of opinion, but certain products emerge as clear-cut favorites.

Business computer. Since its introduction last August, the top-of-the-line IBM PC-AT has taken the industry by storm — in fact, IBM can't build enough. With a 20-megabyte hard disk, 1.2 Mb floppy disk and speedier processing than the ordinary PC or XT, it has become the most sought-after system on the market. The AT is priced aggressively — only about \$1,700 more than the XT — but the street price of the XT has fallen so dramatically in the last few months that the XT has become one of the best buys around. You now can buy an XT — a PC with a 10 Mb hard disk — for a lower price than was charged for most IBM look-alike machines a few months ago.

IBM-compatible computer. The most impressive feature of the new XT look-alike Compaq Deskpro Model 4 is the built-in tape cartridge that easily backs up the hard disk. It also features greater screen resolution and faster pro-

cessing speed than the IBM XT. A close runner-up in this category is the AT&T PC 6300. AT&T is thought by some to be the only PC compatible manufacturer that stands a chance — in the long run — to survive in direct competition with IBM.

Portable computer. Of all the computers advertised as "portable" (weighing less than 15 pounds) or transportable (less than 50 pounds), only two are considered state-of-the-art: the newly released Data General/One and the overpriced (topping \$6,000) GRID Compass II. Against the rash of LCD (liquid crystal display) machines from Hewlett-Packard, Data General, and Texas Instruments, the Data General wins with a screen more than double the size of the others. (All LCD machines seem to strain the eyes with extended use. The electroluminescent GRID screen, on the other hand, is bright, easy to read and praised by all — at least those who can afford it.)

Letter-quality printer. The silent Hewlett-Packard LaserJet is the hottest printer around. The runner-up is the tried and true Diablo 630 ECS, the most capable "work horse" daisy-wheel printer on the market. Although IBM's new QuiteWriter shows promise as a daisy-wheel alternative, the bothersome noise of its ribbon-feed mechanism currently prevents it from overtaking the Diablo machine.

Add-on disk with back-up. The Bernoulli Box from Iomega, with one or two removable 10-Mb disks, is a marvelous concept. It is said to be faster than the XT and allows the user to back up to a second disk to be used in place of the first if necessary. Tallgrass Technologies' popular hard disk with tape backup came in second.

Integrated software. I think this is a passing fad; users yawn while complicated programs like Symphony and Framework slug it out. Even so, Framework gets the nod, followed by Symphony. With the recent release of TopView by IBM — allowing the user to integrate a variety of unrelated programs within different windows on the screen — it will be interesting to see how the well-funded developers of Framework and Symphony (Ashton-Tate and Lotus) react to protect their turf. Since both are currently selling at a hefty \$695, price cuts seem likely.

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